THE DECLINE OF WISDOM.

Gabriel Marcel

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THE DECLINE OF WISDOM

by

Gabriel Marcel



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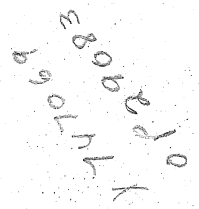
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FOREWORD

THE most serious misunderstanding to which my work has given rise (among those who either know only a part of it, or who perhaps approach it with minds not altogether free from philosophical prejudice) is the belief that it is irrationalist.

The essays in this short volume will, I hope, prove how little basis there is for this judgment.

In reflecting on the ever-increasing aberrations in the sphere of ethical and speculative thought and in that of aesthetics, I have found myself by reaction growing increasingly aware of certain values which I had spontaneously depreciated during the formative years of (what I do not like to call) my philosophy.

These values are all related to wisdom and common sense.

It is understandable that a philosophy whose direction is truly existential, in the sense given to the word by Kierkegaard and his disciples, should, to some extent, discredit such notions, and that wisdom, and, still more, common sense should seem from this point of view as in a sense devalued, devalued, that is, in relation to a state of consciousness which clings passionately to the most irreducibly individual elements contained in it.

Inevitably, as I reacted against the exaggerations of such an existential philosophy, and in particular against the conception of an alleged primacy of existence over essence, I tended again to examine very seriously these values which had been imprudently discredited, and I was drawn to this the more so as world events proved with glaring evidence that today humanity itself, and not only the individual, is dangerously tempted to commit suicide. It is of course possible to conceive, in the abstract, of a philosophy that discounts the increasing dangers and temptations of the world around us. But for one who like myself is opposed to the spirit of abstraction a philosophy of this sort can only seem to be a possibility without substance

which the mind should deliberately reject. It is not therefore by chance that in these recent years I have been drawn into closer and closer contact with thinkers so deeply imbued with the sense of the universal as Gustav Thibon, Max Picard and poets such as T. S. Eliot.

THE LIMITATIONS OF INDUSTRIAL CIVILISATION

INDUSTRIAL civilisation: the meaning of the words seems obvious, but I think only because they evoke a set of images and ready-made ideas. The moment we say 'industrial civilisation' we see factories, smoke, slums, suburbs, what have you, and all the commonplaces about mechanisation spring into our minds; 'Mechanisation means progress', or 'Mechanisation is a scourge' and so on. But none of it is enough to enable us to form even a preliminary concept.

The trouble (as I have had occasion to say in a lecture I gave in Florence) is that the notion of civilisation itself has its ambiguities, and the idea of industrial civilisation, seemingly more exact, cannot help being affected by them. In principle, or rather at first, 'civilisation' meant the state of civilised man as against a state of being primitive—savagery, barbarism; this is an idea we already find in the philosophy of the Greeks, particularly of Aristotle, and which, after suffering a number of mishaps, reappeared in force in the humanism of the Renaissance. Perhaps we should note that its apparent obviousness and brilliance dimmed in proportion as the accent was placed upon original sin and its to some extent irreparable consequences.

In the eighteenth century, however, at least in J. J. Rousseau's writings, it was confronted with a form of nature worship which pin-pointed its corruption; while in the nineteenth century, on the contrary, the West, fascinated by the progress of science and technics, seized on the idea of civilisation as the reward of the fullest development of man's rational faculties. For positivism and all the schools of thought connected with it, civilisation was the triumph of enlightened order over confusion, violence and disorder. The optimists of a hundred years ago even thought of it as the means to universal peace, implying the gradual substitution of right for might and bringing with it not only generally increased well-being, but as a

corollary the harmonious development of the sciences and the arts.

It would be difficult for us after the events of the past half-century to share this optimism and in particular to see why man's growing mastery over nature should go hand in hand with the triumph of right. In any case, the development of historical science and sociology has in the meantime given rise to a very different conception. In place of the over-all and in many ways confused notion of civilisation as a whole there has grown up the idea of civilisations which are not only distinct but altogether separate and irreducible to one another's terms, civilisations which may co-exist, though not without friction, but which are ever in danger of replacing one another in circumstances which are always tragic.

It became more and more evident, especially in the light of ethnological discoveries, that those whom the civilised had presumptuously labelled savages had their own civilisation with its perfectly recognisable structure and cohesion.

It is tempting to say that in view of all this there came about a dissociation between the ideas of civilisation and value which in the global concept had been inseparable. Actually I do not believe that this can ever be absolute; it would be more true to say that with the development of a pluralist and historicist theory of civilisations, values came to be *relativised*—if I may be forgiven so barbarous a term. However you define it, a civilisation implies beliefs—that is to say, values; what is dangerous is to assert *a priori* that these values are necessarily those which rationalist European thought, starting with the Greeks, has attempted to define as universals. Not that I would say that such a reduction is necessarily impossible, only that it would need the utmost caution.

Can any of this help us to see a little further into what 'industrial civilisation' means?

Obviously it is quite different from a rural civilisation, for example. We have only to think of England to see how these two sorts of civilisation were able to co-exist for a very long time, even in juxtaposition; nor can it be said that their co-existence has now ended, though everything goes to show that

industrial civilisation is predominating and this in circumstances which can easily be defined.

What is also evident is that each of these civilisations forms around a particular way of life, and above all that each of these ways of living belongs to its own particular environment.

I have been greatly struck by what Georges Friedmann has to say about what he calls the technical environment as against the natural environment.

The Technical Environment

In the natural environment man is present in his work. 'The span of work is as yet no bigger than that of man's natural movements in their technical capacity. The tools which *homo faber* uses in his natural environment may be complex but their interposition between his hand or foot and the material on which he is at work does not mean that his part in production is eliminated. On the contrary, they humanise production further since they make it possible to manufacture something to which the craftsman, who completes the work himself, brings greater continuity and precision, carrying out his plan and giving it the harmony of a finished whole. In such a profession as medicine this fullness of human presence is still noticeable.'

The natural environment as such is a climate of presence and sympathy. In it 'a life rich in direct understanding, in presence, is combined with the spread of craftsmanship and the beginnings of industry'.

Nothing more different from this could be found than the technical environment which, as such, is artificial and inhuman in the strongest sense, even where everything has been done to improve the material conditions of work. 'In this milieu', says Georges Friedmann, 'boredom is the worker's mate, the only possible escape is on the side of man'; and Georges Navel, the author of *Traveaux* and *Parcours*, who has been through this experience, writes:

> In the world of the factory all that there remains of nature is man, the companion, the fellow being. If you were alone in it you would die. No trees, no plants, no dogs. Everything you touch is hard, dense; next to it the soft stuff of which your hand is made seems

> very fragile. In that fluid world of metal it is reassuring to meet a comrade.

Georges Friedmann comments that so long as this world is still frequented by men, by comrades, there is a chance of conquering it, of moulding it to the ends of culture and dignity. Nothing could be more true, I think, but we must still ask ourselves on what terms this comradeship can remain genuine. It stares us in the face that it is in grave danger of being impaired by the intrusion of politics, or if you like of propaganda.

The moment men are brought in whose function is to pass on slogans, a milieu which was still living and charged with currents of friendship and even genuine brotherhood is in danger of being frozen, or to put it in another way, of turning into a field for the transmission of quite different currents, which are inhuman and magnetised by the ends purely of domination.

A question which arises here is whether people whose training has been almost exclusively technical are not much more susceptible to this kind of propaganda than those who have received what at the beginning of this century was still called a general culture. Not that I would suggest a return to the teaching of the classics as it was conceived at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries; but it seems that a counterweight to the growing technical trend in education needs to be invented.

A strictly complementary aspect of industrial civilisation is brought to light in this fine passage by Spengler which occurs in the last chapter of his *Decline of the West:*[1]

> Then followed . . . the discovery of the steam engine. . . . Till then nature had rendered services, but now she was tied to the yoke as *a slave*, and her work was as though in contempt measured by a standard of horse-power. We advanced from the muscle-force of the Negro, which was set to work in organised routines, to the organic reserves of the Earth's crust, where the life-forces of millennia lay stored as coal; and today we cast our eyes on inorganic nature, where water-forces are already being brought in to supplement coal. As the horse-powers run to millions and milliards, the numbers of the population increase and increase, on a scale that no other

[1] Allen and Unwin, 1926.

Culture ever thought possible. This growth is a *product of the Machine*, which insists on being used and directed, and to that end centuples the forces of each individual. For the sake of the machine, human life becomes precious. *Work* becomes the great word of ethical thinking; in the eighteenth century it loses its derogatory implication in all languages. The machine works and forces the man to co-operate. The entire Culture reaches a degree of activity such that the earth trembles under it.

And what now develops, in the space of hardly a century, is a drama of such greatness that the men of a future Culture, with other souls and other passions, will hardly be able to resist the conviction that 'in those days' nature herself was tottering. The politics stride over cities and peoples; even the economics, deeply as they bite into the destinies of the plant and animal worlds, merely touch the fringe of life and efface themselves. But this technique will leave traces of its heyday behind it when all else is lost and forgotten. For this Faustian passion has altered the Face of the Earth.

This is the outward- and upward-straining life-feeling—true descendant, therefore, of the Gothic—as expressed in Goethe's Faust monologue when the steam-engine was yet young. The intoxicated soul wills to fly above space and Time. An ineffable longing tempts Man to indefinable horizons. He would free himself from the earth, rise into the infinite, leave the Bonds of the body, and circle in the universe of space amongst the stars. That which the glowing and soaring inwardness of St. Bernard sought at the beginning, that which Grünewald and Rembrandt conceived in their backgrounds, and Beethoven in the trans-earthly tones of his last quartets, comes back now in the intellectual intoxication of the inventions that crowd one upon another. Hence the fantastic traffic that crosses the continents in a few days, that puts itself across oceans in floating cities, that bores through mountains, rushes about in subterranean labyrinths, uses the steam-engine till its last possibilities have been exhausted, and then passes on to the gas-engine, and finally raises itself above the roads and railways and flies in the air; hence it is that the spoken word is sent in one moment over all the oceans; hence comes the ambition to break all records and beat all dimensions, to build giant halls for giant machines, vast ships and bridge-spans, buildings that deliriously scrape the clouds, fabulous forces pressed together to a focus to obey the hand of a child, stamping and quivering and droning works of steel and glass in which tiny man moves as unlimited monarch and, at the last, feels nature as beneath him.

And these machines become in their forms less and ever less human, more ascetic, mystic, esoteric. They weave the earth over with an infinite web of subtle forces, currents, and tensions. Their

bodies become ever more and more immaterial, ever less noisy. The wheels, rollers, and levers are vocal no more. All that matters withdraws itself into the interior. Man has felt the machine to be devilish, and rightly. It signifies in the eyes of the believer the deposition of God. It delivers sacred Causality over to man and by him, with a sort of foreseeing omniscience, is set in motion, silent and irresistible.

The expression 'Faustian passion' may be surprising, but its use is justified by certain texts in Act IV of the Second Faust. 'The earthly sphere,' declares Faust, 'is still big enough, I find, for big actions whose success may light up the world. I feel in myself a great strength ready to be used with courage.' And a little further he speaks to the Emperor of 'spirits silently at work in the depths of unfathomable abysses, decomposing and combining rich emanations into rare, metallic gases and ceaselessly inventing new things'. So I think it is legitimate to keep Spengler's expression and to describe the values of industrial civilisation as Faustian. Perhaps by exploring this notion and by linking it with that of the industrial environment, we may have a chance to discover the limits of this civilisation.

There is every evidence that there is in it a fundamental paradox.

The Characteristics of Technical Progress

It is evident that the mastery of the forces of nature by means of increasingly elaborate technical processes is a liberation which should be welcomed as such; but it is no less true that, for reasons which must be examined, this liberation is in danger of being itself turned into a slavery. It is in this contradiction that the drama of industrial civilisation lies. Going back to the ambiguity I mentioned at the beginning, I would say that, again for the same reasons, this particular civilisation is in danger of developing *against* certain universal values which would seem to be a part of civilisation in general.

But here we must be very careful. In his valuable book[1] on Work and Civilisation, M. Hyacinthe Dubreuil very properly and forcefully denounces the judgments which intellectuals often

[1] *Travail et Civilisation*, 1953, Plon, Paris.

make upon realities of which they have no experience. I believe his criticism to be fully justified and I am most anxious, in what follows, to avoid any such mistake.

'Literature which attacks technical progress and machinery and turns them into a sort of monster', writes M. Dubreuil, 'is a waste of time. It is a case of mistaken identity; for although if work is badly done, somebody is responsible, the villain is not the lifeless machine but man who has decided to use it wrongly.'

I should like to distinguish between these two statements. The first is perfectly correct: it is ridiculous to denounce technical progress as such (I will come back to this point, for I am anxious not to leave the slightest ambiguity). The second assertion seems to me, however, to imply an over-simplification and I would even say a mistake: man has not 'decided' to use the lifeless machine wrongly; the truth is infinitely more complex, as we shall see.

As to the absurdity of condemning technical progress in itself, I think it is possible to establish certain principles which it would be hard to dispute. To start with a definition, let us say simply that a technique is a specialised and rationally elaborated form of knowledge, and let us add that the techniques we are concerned with here are all skills which contribute to the transformation of the world. They all offer certain basic characteristics which it would be difficult to overstress.

(1) They are specialised and, almost always, within their own specialised field they tend to give rise to new forms of specialisation.

(2) They are perfectible.

(3) And they are transmissible. Indeed, the more rationalised they are, the more easily can they be transmitted.

What does run the danger of getting lost is what craftsmen call a knack, something that can only be passed on by example if at all, and not by any theoretical training or instruction. Again, certain empirical recipes may have been lost because they were never, properly speaking, fixed. But a technique such as we conceive it today is transmissible by definition.

The perfectibility of techniques should also be emphasised,

and we must note particularly that in this field perfectibility has an exact and univocal meaning. If in fact one technical process is better than another it is because it improves output or makes it possible to produce the same amount in less time or at less cost (in either case production is by definition improved). What is interesting from the philosophical point of view is that in this technical domain alone the word progress has kept the fullness of its meaning. To see the truth of this we have only to take a look at the fog in which it wraps itself the moment it is applied, say, to morals or to institutions. The reason is that the criteria applicable to ethics, politics or indeed aesthetics can not have the same precision as they have in the field of technics. I believe this to be a most important point, and I think that if the theories of progress current since the eighteenth century and particularly since Condorcet have been so deceptive this may largely be due to the neglect of its basic truth. It could be shown, I think, that if there is such a thing as social progress it is to the extent that there exist social techniques.

But after all the essential questions are those which have to do with human happiness, or shall we say contentment on the one hand and with spiritual quality on the other. And it has yet to be shown that the progress of social techniques as such is sufficient either to increase contentment or to develop spiritual quality. Only the most rudimentary psychology could induce us without further argument to believe it does.

The Positive Value of Technical Progress

I have blamed myself recently, particularly when I was lecturing in South America, with not having perhaps brought out sufficiently in my writings what I would call the positive value of technical progress. I am not thinking only of its usefulness—only a lunatic would deny that—but of something more than mere utility. There is no doubt that in applying a technique which he has mastered the technician experiences a joy which is not only basically innocent, but even noble. It is a joy which is bound up with the consciousness of power over inanimate things, that is to say, over a reality which is subordinate and is in a sense meant to be controlled by man.

It is true that things offer a resistance, but it is, as it were, the resistance of inertia which it is good to overcome. Moreover, it can only be overcome by means which have an extreme precision. The value of a technique is that of the precision with which it is applied, and we must remember the connection between precision and intellectual honesty.

A link notion—and it already bears an ethical or at least pre-ethical character—is that of accuracy. No technician can do without the virtue of accuracy: in his world inaccuracy is always punished and the punishment is sometimes terrible. Hence the awareness of responsibility which he incessantly carries with him.

At the same time this awareness has to be of a particularly subtle kind. It must not invade the foreground of his consciousness but must remain on its outer fringes. A surgeon performing an operation cannot forget his responsibility for a moment, but it must not weigh on him to the point of being an obsession: it is not on this that he must focus or even concentrate his mind but on his task; responsibility is rather the spirit in which his task is carried out or the light in which he sees it, and this is the very light of his sense of accuracy and precision.

And, again, there is the purity and soundness of the joy which goes with technical research when it results in a discovery. I am inclined to think that what is positive in all this is that the technician is not thinking of himself, but of his task, and here again there is the saving virtue of precision. It is true, of course, that the technician is a man and that it is natural for him to think of the personal advantage his success may bring him, but this consideration is, as it were, collateral; his research work in itself holds no room for vanity, for the time being at any rate it literally drives it out. In this the technician differs from the intellectual or the artist; in a sense his work is necessarily more pure, it leaves literally no place for ambition or flattery.

Alain distinguishes between human attitudes involved in actions applied to things and those applied to people. It is indeed far simpler for an action to be pure if it bears on things, while to act on people, or to be more accurate, to bring to bear on them the techniques which are rightly applicable to

things is, we shall see, an abuse pregnant with the gravest consequences.

The Effect of Technical Progress on Man

All this brings us to the second of M. Dubreuil's assertions, the one concerning the wrong use of the machine. I have already said that I disagree with it.

We might say, using Christian terms—and these terms are urged on us not only by faith but also by reflection—that it is in the nature of techniques to lead the mind into temptation. But we must immediately qualify this statement. It would obviously be absurd to think of techniques as wielding power in their own right; it is always a being who leads into temptation.

I do not, of course, intend to go into the problem of daemonology, although it undoubtedly arises on the fringes of our enquiry. All we have to ask ourselves here, and this without trespassing beyond experience, is what the notion of temptation means and in what circumstances it may become active. My view is that it is invariably bound up with power. The moment that we are endowed with power of whatever sort we are exposed to the temptation of abusing it. How are we to account for this face which is so intimately part of our way of being?—I think that it is nearly always a phenomenon which could be compared to vertigo—vertigo being the impulse to 'let oneself go to' something.

What I mean is this. The exercise of any sort of power should by rights be accompanied by the exercise of control over this power itself—this is a sort of 'power at one remove'. But in practice such concomitance of strength and control over that strength is by no means inevitable. We find, on the contrary, that the more suddenly power is acquired—or at any rate the less the conditions of its acquisition are like those of natural growth—the more does it tend to behave as a *parvenu*: like a self-made man who believes (always quite wrongly) that he is in no man's debt, it rejects, as though it were an unwarrantable intrusion or encroachment, any form of limitation or control over itself.

This being said, my suggestion that it is in the nature of techniques to lead the mind into temptation simply amounts to this: a man who has mastered one or more techniques tends in principle to distrust what is alien to these techniques; or rather, he will at a pinch admit the validity of this or that other technique he has only heard of or knows only at second hand; but he will usually be most unwilling to accept the idea that a meta-technical activity may have value. But in respect of technical power which is immediate, what I have called power at one remove is necessarily meta-technical. Indeed it is these powers at one remove which, in a technical civilisation, are most likely to be discredited.

But let us not forget that the activity among all others which can most truly be described as power at one remove is reflection. And in fact, everything goes to show that in a civilisation of this sort the importance of reflection will be minimised if not denied. Already we see logico-mathematical neo-positivism, a philosophy which denies the role of reflection altogether, gradually invading England and a part of the United States; to the philosophers of this school, the idea of a philosophy of reflection is utterly alien, they almost put it aside as a sort of mysticism.

At this point our analysis must be taken a step further. Whence does reflection spring? I mean true reflection which on n account must be confused with some kind of ratiocination. I once wrote in *Being and Having*, 'Power at one remove is nourished by a blindfolded intuition; this intuition is something that I am, not something that I have', and it belongs to philosophical thought to retrieve it and, as it were, to make it articulate.

But let us not linger in this abstract realm. The more the world I dwell in is alive, the more generously it is watered by life, the more my intuition—and I would really prefer to call it my participation—will be rich and substantial at its source. But does this not bring us back to the difference between natural and technical environment? For there is no doubt that the technical environment is the poorest possible in life, the furthest possible removed from nature. While in the natural

environment, as Friedmann writes, 'the whole of human life and in particular the whole life of work is woven through and through by those rhythms which, flowing from generation to generation, have been gradually formed and established in the society to which they so intimately belong'.

I would not in the least suggest our indulging in some sort of pseudo-romantic hankering after a lost paradise, a paradise whose undoubted benefits, we may be sure, were balanced by terrible disadvantages. All I am trying to show is that although we cannot speak, like M. Dubreuil, of unwillingness or of ill will on the part of man, technical development does, taken in itself, tend to create a world which is singularly barren and as a result unfavourable to the use of powers at one remove; and let us note that these powers correspond fairly closely to what in other ages was known as wisdom.

As a simple illustration of what I mean by a barren world, take the family and the danger it runs in a technical milieu where the women work as well as men, the children are virtually left to themselves and there often arises between them and their parents a sort of mutual hostility. When I spoke of a world which is generously watered by life I was thinking particularly of the benefits of a strongly established family.

But what is it that wisdom as such is normally called upon to oppose? It stands over against *hybris*, pride. Where the counterweight to pride is lacking, the techniques left, as it were, to their own weight, are moreover burdened by the weight of pride which in no sense belongs to them. For once again, it is not that the techniques have an intrinsic reality; they are only given a specious reality through a vice of abstraction in the one who uses them, takes his pleasure in them and lastly becomes their slave.

To put it differently, techniques tend to become the dynamic lineaments of an abstract world in which the intellect is the more at ease the more it is specialised. Actually, this mental agility is the result of a training of which the value, I repeat, is not disputable. But this training implies no contact at any point with an environment which is concrete and, as it were, not altogether explicitly definable; in this it is the opposite of

organic growth, and I am not thinking only of the growth of the body, but of a feeling, a belief, of the becoming of the imagination in all its forms.

The Abstract Character of Industrial Environment

By an odd coincidence, I have just read the following passage in a book by Helmuth Gollwitzer[1] which contains one of the most objective criticisms I have ever come across of Soviet man:

> This system neither recognises any subject as confronting it nor as a result does it allow the development of any such subjects, whether individuals or groups, and this means exactly that here nothing is allowed to grow. If life is unfettered growth in conformity with its own laws, this is surely the gravest accusation that can be brought. And indeed, for the life of the community, both the spiritual and the economic consequences of this fact are terrible. There is room for nothing but pre-established plans and manufactured objects: anything that grows is suspect.

It can of course be objected that what is true of the Soviet world is not necessarily true of industrial civilisation in general, but is this not perhaps merely because in other countries that civilisation has not yet unfolded all its implications? Thus in the United States, the logic of technocracy sometimes comes up against a sentimentality which can be almost childish, while on other occasions it goes hand in hand with a confused religiosity. But what matters to us is to discover what this logic really is and the ways in which it shows itself.

There are two points which seem to me of the highest importance.

Firstly, there is a danger of the technical environment becoming for us the pattern of the universe, that is to say, the categories of its particular structure being claimed to be valid for an objective conception of the world.

And note that this is not a matter of interpretation only; the interpretation becomes embodied, it seeks to reconstitute the world, moulding it to its own image. Never shall I forget my

[1] *Und Führer Woher du Nicht Willst*, Munich, Kaiser Verlag, 1953.

impression on first coming to a country such as Venezuela, where I had the feeling that what had been a landscape was being turned into a builder's yard. There you may witness the kind of planned sectioning and cutting up which I would venture to call sacrilegious. I had this feeling most strongly in Rio de Janeiro, where the hills were going to be levelled without the slightest consideration for the reality of the original site. This is something very significant; whereas in the past a city moulded itself on the natural structure or pre-structure, as it were fulfilling it, we are likely to see larger and larger agglomerations piling up without the slightest regard for the natural pre-formation. There is not the least hesitation in doing violence to nature to carry out an abstract plan.

These words, abstract, abstraction, keep coming back, and this cannot be helped because it is just the crux of it. But we must try to understand the reason for this predominance in the industrial world of the abstract, the planned, the organised, the dissected. It is a difficult question because the causes and conditions are so tangled up that we cannot be sure of discovering all at once which of them is the key to all the others. It is likely anyway that here, as so often, the categories of cause and effect have to be transcended and the vicious circle is the rule. Mass production on a scale which was inconceivable in the past is of course related to the existence of the masses whose needs must be satisfied and for the satisfaction of whose needs an individualised economy is inadequate.

But these masses are not only at the beginning, but at the end; I mean that they are themselves—as masses—partly the result of mass production and its consequences in every economic field. There is also the fact that big industry tends itself to create the needs which it later claims to satisfy. And no doubt it must be added that this whole process becomes increasingly inevitable as time goes on, or if you prefer, *it tends to create its own inevitability.*

So far as I can see (but I must again stress that my lack of competence forbids me to speak categorically) we are confronted by an enormous system which consolidates itself more and more, so that it is less and less easy to see the logical

possibility of anything altering it in principle. 'Logical', I said, but history is there to show us how inadequate are such logical, rational considerations. The mysterious role of crises, catastrophes, even natural upheavals may be to bring into play compensating elements, which act, however, in ways that confound our reason.

The Process of Dehumanisation and the Technicality of Knowledge

It is of course an absurd illusion to think that by means of some sort of world planning these calamities can be kept permanently at bay.

But there is something more important still. It is impossible for man not to consider himself as part of this cosmos—or of this a-cosmos—planned and dissected by the technicians; as a result, he inevitably becomes a target for those techniques which, in principle, are legitimately applicable only to the outward world. There are already countless instances of this in the fields of experimental psychology, psychiatry and so on.

One of the most characteristic of them is the incredible development of the use of tests in America and in the Americanised countries. There are, of course, certain fields where their use is altogether justified; I would say that such a field is that of motor-sensory behaviour; it is perfectly proper to determine by means of tests whether a given person is fit to exercise certain well defined functions directly related to such activity —to be a pilot or a truck driver, for instance. But the more we leave this field for that of the intelligence properly so called, that is to say, of understanding and *a fortiori* of affectivity, the objection to the use of tests is grave, even decisive.

Experimentation, if we reflect upon it, should as such be handled warily; but the striking fact is that, for the reasons I have given, it is reflection which is simply set aside in these Americanised countries. I have had a recent confirmation of it in talking with a Swedish psychologist who told me that he had literally discovered since he came to France the limitations of certain techniques which were sanctioned in his own country without the slightest warning as to the conditions in which they could be suitably applied.

But we must see that as soon as the technical environment has become the predominating, general, normal environment, it is strictly normal for such techniques to become generalised and to proliferate. This is one more victory for abstraction, the individual being now a unit whom it is possible and right to deal with as with all the other units in his category.

And what becomes of the distinction between the normal and the abnormal? It will almost inevitably be interpreted in a behaviourist sense. It is normal for the individual placed in such and such conditions to react in a given way and any anomaly is a failure to adapt himself. The end of it, almost certainly, is what I would call a general *pragmatisation* of human beings and relations, as indeed we see in American and Americanised countries such as Sweden. The astonishingly high incidence of psychosis in these countries is enough to show that the system which they seem to have adopted involves a tragic oversight of certain deep human exigencies, and this is perhaps the more convincing because these are countries which are prosperous and where all the basic needs seem generally speaking to be satisfied. But the ravages caused in them by boredom, sexual immorality and drunkenness are, as it were, irrefutable symptoms of a deep-seated lesion, of what I would indeed prefer to call a sin against life itself.

But make no mistake—that sin is most intimately bound up with a certain technical representation of the world. I would say that as a result of the act by which man projects upon the world the light of a knowledge which is technicalised, an increasingly monstrous image of the world and of himself is thrown back at him—an image which is ever more distorted and ever less decypherable.

Is this not indeed perhaps the unrecognisable image which so often faces us in modern art? In general, the consequences of all this are incalculable, particularly in what relates to self-knowledge. The Socratic axiom implied the idea of an identity between the knower and the known, and this idea was at the basis of traditional philosophy until Hegel. But now, following upon the hyperbolic development of technics, a development of which the so-called acceleration of history is perhaps in some

ways only a corollary, the truth of this postulate is increasingly put in doubt. As a result the subject tends less and less to be treated as a subject and is consequently less and less respected. Hence that spreading violation of privacy which is one of the most horrifying features of the modern world, whose worst excesses in this direction show themselves in literature.

It might at least be thought that, as a beneficent counterpart to all this, the new skills might strengthen man's hold on his earthly habitation; unfortunately experience belies it, and the reason is doubtless that in such a world the very idea of taking root ends by seeming contradictory. What we said of agglomerations replacing cities is relevant: an agglomeration is, as it were, the very *embodiment of uprootedness*.

In such a world the mass transfers of populations which have taken place in the totalitarian countries should no longer be considered an anomaly. On the contrary, they may well become the rule once the vital link is broken between man and his environment and people are seen as mere units of production—as machines which are needed here or there for reasons connected with the general economy and whose feelings are of not the slightest interest. Indeed, perhaps it would be best so to train these men-machines that their needs and feelings would become atrophied and in the end vanish!

I remember once being told by someone who was dealing with the terrible problem of Displaced Persons that some country or other only wanted people who could make shoes! The entity one-who-can-make-shoes is substituted for the concrete reality of so-and-so, married to such and such a person and father of such and such a child.

This indeed is again the sin against life understood in its deepest sense. Life is no longer, as it were, conceived except in bio-sociological terms, that is to say, as a process whose physico-chemical conditions are claimed to be strictly and objectively definable and which exists in view of a given task which relates to the collectivity.

Here again the wildest excesses of the totalitarian régimes seem only to be the ultimate expression of a monstrous logic, the logic of dehumanisation. It is easy enough to show that its

hallmark is always that of the will to power. And no doubt we shall always feel the need to find a scapegoat in whom to localise that will. Indeed it is quite possible that at the outset, some one person hungering for domination helped to launch this terrifying venture. But it must not be forgotten that by now the system is endowed with its own power of self-consolidation, which incidentally is the crowning absurdity, since it may in the end involve us in the sacrifice of all, certainly not for all but precisely for no one—an immense holocaust to nothingness.

But how should we not see in all this a huge inverted caricature of what the Christian can only call the plan of salvation? I have said inverted for if on the one side sacrifice is the very expression of love, on the other it is the manifestation of a devitalised rationality which is already turning human beings into robots. But this glaring opposition can only be seen at the furthest limit, because undeniably, so long as this enormous process of dehumanisation is still on its way, it involves qualities which are genuinely spiritual, especially generosity, although of that generosity it tends, by the strangest paradox, to dry up the springs and as it were to preclude the very possibility. Thus I do not hesitate to say that, if we could discover what this process is at bottom and in principle, putting aside the illusions and misconceptions which it encourages and exploits, we would see that it cannot be considered as anything except basically daemoniac.

Remedies for the Dehumanisation of the World

So I do no violence to my argument if I say that the world is in need of exorcism. But this is obviously a misleading term and I have in mind no sort of magic formulae. The only genuinely exorcising power is that of love, and even then love needs to be incarnate.

But as we have known for twenty centuries, such an incarnation, if it can take place at all, can only do so at the humblest level. There must be a Bethlehem of reflection and fervour and this I see as the only genuine hearth and nourishment for thought anxious to avoid at all cost falling into ideology or still worse into foolish sentimentality.

But nothing I have said should make us forget the considerations we started from. It would indeed be to fall under the joint spells of sentimentalism and ideology to hope for some sort of Gandhi revolution and a return to a pre-technical age. The burden of technics has been assumed by man and he can no longer put it down because he finds it heavy. The consequences of such an abdication would be catastrophic. Just as in becoming de-Christianised humanity tends to fall far below the level of pre-Christian civilisation, so in giving up what must after all be called the conquests of science it would fall into the lowest degradation.

So the problem—and of course, here we can only state it—is only to know how we may struggle efficaciously against the weight by which in a technical age man is dragged down into the excesses of technocracy. If the word liberty, today so dishonoured, still has any meaning, it is strictly applicable to this act. But clearly, it is not just a question of putting on a brake: no genuine action can be merely negative. It is a question of mobilising such forces as are capable of effectively opposing this immense drift; that these forces are spiritual nobody will deny; but spiritual is another word which is frequently misinterpreted and misspent. What I think we need today is to react with our whole strength against that dissociation of life from spirit which a bloodless rationalism has brought about.

This does not mean that we should go back to some sort of false romanticism—I must admit that I find traces of it even in Bergson. Perhaps the most important task on the plane of speculation is to deepen once again the notion of life itself in the light of the highest and most genuine religious thought. I have had occasion recently to observe that in Germany some such new development seems to be taking place, in profound reaction against the aberrations which have for so long disfigured the very image of that country.

But it must be added at once that this development, which can only take place on the highest levels of spirituality and reflective thought, can never reach the fullness of its authenticity and value unless it has its counterpart in the sphere of action,

and it is here that the need for humility can be plainly seen. For to have exorcising power, action must be on the level of good will, that is to say, love of one's neighbour. It is impossible, I think, to condemn too mercilessly the illusion of achieving anything by introducing into spirituality the sort of planning operations which can only act against the spirit.

I have spoken of meta-technical activities; the proper place of meta-technics is at the juncture of the spiritual and the vital, in a mysterious region which is also that of the *charismata.*

Like all other religious terms without exception, the term charismata can mislead, perhaps by evoking some absurd imagery of kindly spells cast by personages muffled in priestly robes. The simplest is to go back to the etymology. Charisma means gift, a gift of love which itself is gift.

It is in gift, that is to say in grace, that there assuredly lies the only principle capable of breaking, I will not say the world of the techniques in so far as they are admirable means to be used for the good of all, but those superstructures which threaten in the long run to stifle their beneficent power, because they are ordained to the triumph of pride which ultimately encompasses the destruction of the proud.

THE NOTION OF SPIRITUAL HERITAGE

I THINK that I can never forget the more than physical horror and anxiety I experienced in walking among the ruins of inner Vienna in 1946, or more recently in Caen, Rouen or Würzburg. Among these ruins, how could I help evoking that spiritual heritage on which it seemed that human blindness had inflicted such irreparable damage? What concerns us here is not so much the physical destruction of so many irreplaceable monuments of an honourable past but the state of mind from which that destruction is inseparable. Not that this state of mind can be claimed to be the *cause* of the destruction—we should in any case in this field beware of causal interpretations. But what is undeniably true is that the destruction presupposed a technical development which, at least indirectly but none the less most effectively, helped to weaken or even to eliminate those feelings of gratitude and veneration without which those monuments could not lastingly be preserved. To tell the truth, I don't quite know what term will cover this state of mind. At the bottom of it is a growing impatience with what tend increasingly to be regarded as obstacles to the advent of a new world, even of a renewed humanity. Let us see what the philosopher Gerschenson says in his *Correspondence* with V. Ivanov:

> Recently I have felt that all the intellectual acquisitions of mankind, all its wealth of thought, knowledge, treasures accumulated through the centuries, are as intolerable as a yoke, they are like clothes which are too heavy, I feel stifled in them. . . . I say to myself 'What happiness it would be to dive into Lethe, to wash off from my soul the memory of all these religions, philosophies, of all this knowledge, art, poetry—what joy it would be to come out on the other side as naked, light, buoyant as the first man, and to stretch out and raise my arms, without a memory of the past except the crushing weight of all these clothes and the delight of having shed them.' Perhaps we were at ease in our resplendent robes, so long as they were newly made to measure and intact. But now that they have got so torn in the course of all these years, now that they

> hang on us in tatters, I would like to tear them off once and for all and to fling them away.

On a lower plane, I recall another instance of what I mean: an American officer in a town in Burgundy which had virtually been destroyed, saying to a young friend of mine: 'You should be grateful to us for bombing all this old stuff. Now you can have a clean new town.'

There is a growing number of people who no longer recognise their heritage or, rather, who refuse it like a legacy to which burdensome obligations are attached. I remember a young communist Negro furiously attacking an ethnologist who had praised African civilisation. He felt that this praise was somehow intended to fetter him to his traditions, which he was on the contrary longing to shake off like a hateful yoke.

Note that this change in outlook is undoubtedly connected with the growing prestige of youth as such and the discrediting of old age. The old are increasingly regarded as good for nothing, and this after all is simply a corollary of the fact that, generally speaking, output is considered more and more to be the only valid criterion of human value. In South America I was very much struck, even in such countries as Brazil and Peru, with the brutally lighthearted way in which venerable edifices were pulled down to make room for huge characterless buildings that could never house a human presence; they were nothing but tenements meant to hold the largest possible number of individuals and offices piled on top of one another.

All this obviously is true. Nevertheless logically we have no right to go straight on from these observations to a judgment of value. We cannot know *a priori*, that is to say, without a careful analysis, whether we are not faced, in reality, with a widespread aberration. That it is widespread proves nothing either way; a disease does not stop being a disease because it has grown into an epidemic, quite the contrary. The philosopher is thus bound to reflect upon these things and in the first place to ask himself what exact meaning can be given to the concept of spiritual heritage.

The first question which might be asked is whether these two

words are not contradictory. Is not a heritage necessarily something objective, a possession handed on from generation to generation? And is not spirit inspiration and creation? This objection is not merely formal: could it not be reasonably claimed that what is handed on is always a thing, or at most a sign which, in itself, still belongs to the world of things?—while it is the part of the spirit to be always new, always reborn, and always to ascend from the sign to the reality signified which itself can never be passed on but must always be rediscovered.

Let us see if this argument, impressive as it is, in reality deserves to be retained. It is natural to turn in the first place to the arts. Can a picture or a symphony which has come down to us from Rembrandt or Beethoven be described as a material system of signs? This seems to me a confusion. A system of signs is for instance an alphabet or a code, and if we have inherited such a thing we have to find out what the letters or the figures stand for. There is any number of possible keys. The unity of the system is arbitrary: it is purely arbitrarily that to this or that visual symbol this or that sound has been made to correspond. But there is nothing of this kind about a work of art. Its unity, which is by no means arbitrary, has to be grasped by a process of living sympathy.

Besides, the notion of handing on has itself to be understood more deeply, for we nearly always tend to reduce it to its simplest terms, which are, it seems, tactile. Somebody holds something in his hand and passes it on to me so that I should hold it in his place: as in the torch race described by Lucretius. But the moment we have left this tactile field everything is much more complicated. Think, for instance, of teaching a song to a small child: this means teaching him to sing it in his turn. Even in so simple a case as this we have to admit that the difference between transmitting spiritually and materially blurs and begins to vanish. This is still more obvious if we think for instance of parents handing on to their children some particular way of thinking or believing, say their notion of honour. It is true that there is always some material support for such transmission; or rather, at a pinch the transmission could be

identified with the part played by the support, but only if we recognise that it has as its complement something which is quite different and which has no meaning except on the spiritual plane.

I have not, by the way, given any definition of the word spirit, I have in mind the concensus which expresses itself in the common usage rather than in any strictly definable notion.

Thus, what our analysis seems to show is that the notion of handing on is here completely inadequate, and that where spiritual realities are concerned we cannot think simply in terms of a perpetuated *possession*, seen as an object which is handed on from one to another. This, actually, is confirmed by the most current experience, I remember my parents telling me how, one day when they were looking at the admirable porch of the Cathedral of Alençon, two local women stopped in amazement to see them in contemplation of a monument which for them had doubtless only the value of its usefulness.

We could say, I think, that on the one hand, it is only possible to speak of spiritual heritage where there persists an awareness of such a heritage, and on the other, that this awareness can only survive in a certain climate of diffuse gratitude. I stress this word. As I was preparing this book, I came to attach an ever increasing importance to this disposition, while at the same time recognising that it seems to be in some sort waning in the world of today. But I think that a phenomeno-logical analysis must be attempted before we can go on with our inquiry.

One observation to begin with: everything seems to show that gratitude and admiration tend to lessen in the measure that creative power weakens. And let us add that as this power withdraws it is replaced by its toxic and deceptive substitute, the claim to innovate, and by the vanity that goes with it. The self styled innovator is centred upon himself, that is why he is so often unwilling to admire or to be grateful; no doubt he feels that one way or another he risks being diminished or humiliated, whereas the creator as such does not think of himself, is not occupied with himself. You could say that the creative act as such is essentially ingenuous, even if afterwards

the artist looking at his work admires himself and feels that there is nobody to compare with him.

The gratitude we are particularly concerned with here implies in its subject an intense awareness of his own receptivity and is thereby referred wholly to the *other* as the source of the benefit received. I have intentionally used the concrete word source rather than cause. The assertion immanent in gratitude bears on the gift I have received and is directed to the one from whom I have received it. The simplest case, and the easiest to analyse, is where I know my benefactor by name. Should we say, in the terms of a Spinozist psychology, that gratitude is a satisfaction linked with the idea of a given person regarded as cause? But as I have implied above, the term cause is here utterly unsuitable. Besides, this decomposition betrays the concrete reality we are seeking to understand. What we need to know is the nature of the link. And we should add that it is a link which unites my benefactor and myself and that of this union the gift is the means. I prefer the word union to relation because, as was seen by Bradley, the feeling always transcends the relation to which it may be tempting to reduce it.

But is it enough to say that gratitude is a feeling? Does this not make of it simply a state of consciousness or perhaps a habit induced by training? This would be to strip it of its purposiveness and to ignore its proper function in the economy of the spirit. It is clear to my mind that gratitude, even where it can hardly show itself materially at all—perhaps only in a gesture or a smile—is a sort of mysterious restitution, a restitution in spirit. Not only is it a response, still more deeply is it an aspiration to respond more and more intimately; and to respond is of course essentially to recognise. The ambiguity of the French word *reconnaissance* (both 'gratitude' and 'recognition') is helpful in this respect. It could also be said that gratitude is rooted in generosity: those are mean souls who are, as it were, mortified by a gift, as though they felt it was a chain to fetter them.

But it must be added that *gratitude is not only in the moment*, it is lasting, and this is what is meant when it is called a habit. In that sense it is based on memory, it is memory. But it is

memory which is not simply a preservative, rather is it wakefulness, a vigilance of the soul attentive not to lose what it regards as of lasting value. Perhaps the accent will be rightly placed if we remember that this wakefulness is an active struggle against the inward forces of dispersal, let us even say of distraction. The German word *Zerstreutheit* has both meanings. This is where we may see the deep affinity between memory and faithfulness. Forgetting is a lapse of faithfulness. But let it always be recalled that faithfulness is active, it is the opposite of inertia.

Not of course that there is any question of denying the physiological foundation of this activity. But if it is indeed a virtue it is so in so far as it is an inward disposition, firmly maintained whatever the gaps in what I would call mnemonic tissue. And virtue should here be taken in its strict sense—in the sense of *virtus* and as implying courage as opposed to slackness of whatever kind.

All this remains true, if less visibly, when the gratitude is diffused because the giver cannot easily be identified. And there is also the intermediate case of a person receiving a gift without knowing from whom it comes. In a well-born soul gratitude is not abolished by this ignorance. All you can say is that the recipient will feel the need of discovering his benefactor.

But clearly, when we are speaking of a spiritual heritage we are faced with realities which are much less easy to encompass. Nevertheless, thinking in a concrete way it will be possible to find landmarks in experience. In comparing some of the towns in America with the towns of old Europe I spoke of the need to distinguish carefully between a city and what is nothing but an agglomeration and I mentioned that in the one case there is presence while in the other there is none. That presence, or that climate, is manifestly a survival of the past, a survival which ensures the participation of the living in—what? As always when we come to the idea of participation it is difficult to designate the participated reality by an exact term. I do not think that this difficulty is fortuitous; for in a general way the act of designating bears on objects—on this thing or that; but in this case it is not an object or a thing we are concerned

with but rather a life which is in some sense supra-personal.

Let us pause a moment to see what exactly is the meaning of the word supra-personal. Nothing is more common or more unfortunate than the habit, which for clearly discernible reasons is growing, of confusing the infra- and the supra-personal. The mass—and all that pertains to the domain of the mass—is infra-personal. My friend Gustave Thibon has observed with justice that atomisation and collectivisation are two sides of the same and indivisible process which could be described both as devitalising and as de-spiritualising. On a level which is certainly not biological there is probably identity between life and spirit. But the paths we have followed converge on this important fact that it is only where there exists a concrete and organic unity—and not a piling up or an accumulation—that we shall find ourselves in the presence of the supra-personal, and also that only there does it become possible to speak of a spiritual heritage in the sense we are trying to define. The man of the agglomerations is in the deepest sense of the word a man without a heritage and from whom no-one will inherit anything. I am tempted to say that the element in which he subsists is that of non-gratitude—let us not say ingratitude because that would presuppose a gift, a kindness which remains unrecognised, and here, it is truly the kindness that has disappeared. This is true in every possible sense: it is enough to think of the materially unworthy conditions—the slum, the tenement—in which the proletariat as such exists. What has replaced the gift is the always partial, always inadequate satisfaction of a claim which the claimant feels to be profoundly just and also no doubt unlimited. But this world of claims is a world where grace, in the most general sense, is profoundly unthinkable, as it is indeed in a universe which is mechanised and subject to the implacable necessity which rules over the machine.

But between grace and gratitude there exists an intimate connection. This is expressed in the French *action de grace*. It could be said that the gift as such is inseparable from its recognition, and so true is this that the recognition itself can in a sense be described as gift. This is what makes it possible to

regard a being who has not the power of recognition, of gratitude, as a being who is disinherited.

All this helps us to see the vast scale of the problem we are dealing with. But it would be well to have a clearer notion of the nature and the confines of that heritage, and also to ask ourselves to whom is addressed that diffuse gratitude of which I spoke.

The answer to this may at first look simple. Is it not gratitude to our forebears or, if you prefer, to the anonymous multitude of those who have built up the civilisation we enjoy? The commonplace vagueness of this reply makes it suspect. Note to begin with that the term 'civilisation' which I have just used here for the first time covers a reality which is strangely hybrid and which cannot be described as spiritual unless the word is used in the vaguest sense. It is true that we have already mentioned how difficult it is in this domain to establish an exact frontier between the material and the spiritual. It would be safer to say that if such a division is possible it bears not so much on the contents as on the way of living a reality which itself belongs to both the visible and the invisible worlds. Let us further recall the distinction we made earlier between the infra- and the supra-personal. Surely the idea of a nameless multitude throws us back into the infra-personal, and what is infra-personal cannot, by definition, either inspire or feel gratitude. It could be shown at this point that personality itself, as it develops, following its upward rhythm, reaches towards the supra-personal, while if it withers or disintegrates, it falls into the infra-personal. All this amounts to saying that we cannot do with any sort of composite picture or classification; what we need is, on the contrary, to become conscious of a dynamic which is the very life of the spirit.

In the light of this observation and of those we made earlier, it may be possible to re-vitalise, as it were, that notion of spiritual heritage which, unless these precautions are taken, is in danger of hardening, of sclerosis—as happens whenever thought is shut in by the categories of having.

None of this is difficult to grasp if we think of the kind of gratitude we feel before the work of some great artist who still

nourishes our inward life. It may well happen to us in such a case to see the artist as a mediator between ourselves and a world which is not of his own making, but which it has been given to him to discover. Once again we come upon the distinction, which I believe to be fundamental, between creation and production: it would be difficult to speak of mediation in the case of something manufactured or produced.

The issue may be confused for us by the fact that the artist, in the course of his earthly life, has gone through trials of such a kind as to arouse our pity or admiration. But this is not invariably the case; sometimes on the contrary the work seems only to have come into being at the cost of the artist as a man and of his human virtues. Thus our gratitude seems really to go not to the man as such but to the spirit which became embodied in him, even though such an incarnation presupposes a sort of active self-effacement on his part, for which he should be given credit. This is an illustration of what was said of the relation between the personal and the supra-personal.

If the example of the artist taken individually is particularly clear, we must also see that here again there can be no true demarcation and that a kind of mysterious communication seems to take place between the works of different artists, however original each one is in itself.

Thus we are led to the idea that, however you consider it, a spiritual heritage seems to be a kind of mediation. But I will add at once that this mediation is itself mediated. What should we understand by this obscure expression? It means that the heritage we speak of is not only an intermediary between ourselves and the spirit, whatever metaphysical definition we give the term, but that we can only recognise that heritage for what it is in the light of that Idea to which alone it owes its value and its dignity. This explains why it is that the more the notion of spirit ebbs from human consciousness the more the idea of such a heritage tends to become obliterated. And this obliteration in its turn shows itself in the progress of impiety, taking this word in a sense completely independent of confessional religion of any sort. Piety is the feeling for what is holy. And what is holy is inviolable. And the inviolable stands

in the way of force itself, force has no hold over it. It seems to me particularly important to see that we are here in a dimension which has nothing to do with history as it is commonly understood since Hegel. Not that Hegel, at any rate in his early work, lacked the notion of spiritual heritage: on the contrary, he had it in a very high degree. But I think that, through its inward slant, his thought was to tend in fact towards a mutilated philosophy, a philosophy which, though continuing to be inspired by him superficially, was to be turned by his followers against the basic tenets of his early doctrine. I am not sure that this contradiction or regression is not implied in the very notion of objectivity as it works itself out in a philosophy based on the dialectic of the Master and the Slave. To understand this it is enough to compare almost any text inspired by this dialectic with a text, say, by Péguy. I am thinking especially of his admirable pages on the Supplicants; but in general, the importance from my own standpoint of his critique of the modern conception of history could hardly be over-emphasised.

At the touch of a science of history which is no longer anything but a lifeless piling up of documents, 'the real event', says Péguy, 'becomes a historical event, it turns to cinders. The temporal world does not wait for the eternal kingdom to fall to ashes'.[1] 'History', he also says, 'is that long railway line running along the coast. But it does not follow the coast itself, it does not coincide with the coast itself, for upon the coast there are tides and men and fishes and the mouths of streams and rivers and the double life of earth and sea.'[2] The historic sciences become a huge refrigerating plant. . . . And let us also say that history understood in this way is the story of irremediable ageing, for the only remedy to old age is the rejuvenating action of grace and this action is totally unsuspected by the historian. How foolish it then becomes to believe in the justice of history and to appeal to its tribunal! Yet 'it is into the senile hands of Clio that the historians of our time would place not only the government of the world but spiritual government as well, and the ordering of what is not of the world'.[3]

[1] Quoted by Delaporte, I, p. 119. [2] *Clio*, p. 248. [3] *Clio*, p. 190.

If we join the profound intuitions of Péguy with our own analyses we shall see that the notion of spiritual heritage empties itself of meaning in the exact measure that history grows debilitated, degenerates into the piling up of information and 'becomes inscription in place of memory'. Gradually all value ebbs from it as a science. If man is to remain in living contact with the past it must be in a dimension other than that in which historians confine themselves to the collecting of their documents.

Does this mean that documentation as such is useless or harmful? Obviously, that would be absurd. But the truth is that this work, indispensable in itself, must be kept alive by an inward disposition which alone can give it meaning and virtue. And the danger is great that the work, in the long run, may stifle the disposition which alone can justify it; while it is only too understandable that in the face of the mountains of historical rubble there arises a sort of nihilistic protest, the protest of the new man clamouring to be rid of the burden of the past. To this Ivanov justly replies that to believe in the possibility of reverting to the state of the primitive is an illusion, 'a betrayal, a forgetting, an escape, a cowardly reaction which comes from weariness . . . the road to the simplicity so dearly loved and so greatly desired must pass through complexity'.[1]

Perhaps we shall see further into this most difficult problem if we examine the connection between spiritual heritage and values properly so called: can we reasonably say that values are themselves inherited? We could also ask this: are we sure that values can be preserved even after we have liberated ourselves from the notion of a spiritual heritage? And can such a liberation be effective or is it an illusion?

Clearly to attempt to answer these questions we must tackle once again the notion of value and find out what use can be made of it. For it must be admitted that there has grown up a scholastic of values just as there was once a scholastic of being, and that by now the more is said about it the less is understood. I suggested in my last book (*Men against Humanity*) that the error lay in trying to carry over into the domain of essence and

[1] *Correspondence*, pp. 144-5.

being a notion which really belongs to the empirical and economic cycle of production, distribution and consumption. How could such a transposition help us to account for the search for truth, for instance, or the practice of the good, or aesthetic creativity? Was it possible, I wondered, that the notion of value in philosophy had followed upon a sort of devaluation of reality itself? If this were so, then we ought surely to go back to where Nietzsche started from, and retrieve the ontological element which he tried to reduce to terms of value and to express in terms of will.

Can these observations help us to answer the questions we asked earlier?

Note firstly that they link up with what was said of gratitude and could be said of veneration. We are evidently outside the circle, not of a philosophy of values as such, but of a *voluntarist* philosophy of values, and I am not thinking only of Nietzsche but at least as much of a contemporary thinker such as Sartre who must indeed be considered in some respects as a degenerate disciple of Nietzsche. In his work is to be found the notion that values are literally created by the one who holds them; freedom pre-exists values, and this in fact is the only meaning that can be given to his famous dictum: 'existence precedes essence'.

Clearly, if Sartre is right, then we have to say that there is no spiritual heritage and also that values exist altogether independently of that non-existent heritage; though it would remain to be seen of what use they are in such a system.

My own outlook is the exact opposite of this, and nothing makes it clearer than the relationship between gratitude and grace. To put freedom at the beginning is deliberately to ignore the reality of gift; it amounts, in fact, to replacing the point of view of creation by the point of view of production. It also means stripping what are still called values of all possible universality. It is curious to note that in one of its aspects Sartrian thought tends towards solipsism—but only in one aspect, for there are others by which it is drawn to Marxism and materialism. This pull is characteristic; it can hardly be permanent for it prevents all equilibrium.

But what becomes of the notion of value in such an outlook

as mine, that is to say, in a metaphysic whose axis is gratitude and the consciousness of the sacred?

To begin with, I stand very firmly by what I said in *Homo Viator*: value can only be incarnate; the moment we disembody it while trying to make it objective, we distort it and we strip it of its authenticity.

Does this mean that all values are in a sense historic and cannot be taken out of the context of their time? Should we say for instance that for us, now, the good can only be defined in terms of the world situation of today? Such a statement would be dangerously ambiguous and might falsify the notion of incarnation. Is it not more true to say that there is always and necessarily a *tension* between the individuality of the circumstances and the universality of the law? In regard to value, that tension seems indeed to be the crux, the spring, for we must turn away both from the formalism which denies history and from pure relativism which incidentally is self-contradictory since it tends to make history into an absolute.

We must admit however that the idea of such a tension is abstract and equivocal. How far can we make it concrete? It would seem necessary to refer it to the subject that I am. But here too there is a danger: on the one hand I might be tempted to cut off this subject from its roots in history; and on the other, if I put it back upon its family tree, do I not withdraw from it its value as subject, depriving it of its power of initiative and turning it into a mere link in an endless chain? Once again, the pitfalls are those of objectivity; and it is at this point that we must go back once more to the notion of spiritual heritage. For from the only philosophic standpoint which seems to me valid, that of reflection or meditation, I see myself as the heir: only we must keep in mind that, as we said earlier, the heritage is a reiterated call rather than a possession which is handed on. And here again we must be careful lest we should ignore the inextricable complexity of real situations. What reaches me is not a single call; rather, I have to make a choice between calls which are discordant and some of which are temptations: and it may be that my freedom will consist chiefly in recognising the temptations for what they are. But the axis of this choice is that

of my very being in as much as this is not a given nature but a creative aspiration: once again we come upon the inexhaustible formula: become that which thou art.

But we cannot stop at this without falling into pure romanticism, and this itself can be a temptation. I would feel that I sinned against the truth if I did not point out what are, after all, the grave objections which in the present world situation can be raised against this concept, however satisfying it may be to the mind. As one of the heirs I have the duty to see that world situation not only from my own standpoint but from that of the countless multitude of the disinherited who are all around me, and this obligation is certainly not one of the least pressing of the calls that reach me. My first duty is to reject the lie that after all the disinherited are also heirs. The truth is rather that to be heirs they must first be human beings, and to be a human being means not only to possess the biological characteristics of a given species but to live in a human way; for all appearances to the contrary, these words have a perfectly precise meaning, at any rate in a philosophy of the spirit. To live humanly means to live in such material conditions that the human being is not crushed under the weight of care, and that his consciousness is able to develop an awareness of both self and other—and also of a reality which transcends the opposition between the two. These conditions relate to the satisfaction of basic needs—food, housing and the rest. . . . Here Marxism is right to denounce the mystifying tactics employed by those who bring in spiritual considerations inopportunely in order to veil realities which they have not the strength or the courage to face in their nakedness. And this uncovers an immense problem of which it is indeed hard to find the positive solution: how shall the heirs so transform the world of the disinherited that they in turn may share in the spiritual heritage? The extraordinary difficulty of the problem lies in that we, the heirs, appear from a certain point of view as allies of an economic system of which it may be asked whether it does not pre-suppose that world of the disinherited. Hence we ought carefully to examine what may be the nature of that alliance. For it is easily enough misconceived, and here the objection to the claims of Marxism as

a philosophy, as a *Weltanschauung*, in the domain of religion as in that of aesthetic values is insurmountable.

To say for instance that at a given level of poverty and exploitation there is a danger of religion being used by the exploiters as an additional means of pressure is to recognise a fact of which unhappily instances are not lacking; but to go from this to conclusions bearing upon the essence of religion itself is radically illegitimate. The Christian has simply to declare that by reason of human weakness it is always possible to pervert that essence but without real injury to the content of faith. But it must also be added that unfortunately on the existential plane there is always danger of this confusion arising and that in this sense a bad priest is literally a false witness who betrays [illegible]t and contributes by his example to the spreading of distrust and hate in place of love and faith.

It should be observed that in the light of the notions of testimony and creative attestation the notion of spiritual heritage which I have attempted to analyse in the first part of this essay is, as it were, raised and transfigured. But on this ground even more than on any other, it is clear that there can be no question of imagining anything that bears the slightest likeness to the handing on of property. Perhaps we should turn at this point to the idea of development so profoundly elaborated by Cardinal Newman:

> This process is called the development of an idea, being the germination, growth and perfection of some living, that is, influential truth, or apparent truth, in the minds of men during a sufficient period. . . . It grows when it incorporates, and its purity consists, not in isolation but in its continuity and sovereignty.[1]

Though it remains to be seen what is the exact meaning given here to the word idea.

> The stronger and more living an idea, that is, the more powerful hold it exercises on the minds of men, the more able is it to dispense with safeguards and trust itself against the danger of corruption.[2]

But such a statement presupposes a veritable transcendence of the idea even if it is not understood in a strictly Platonic sense.

[1] *Development of Christian Doctrine*, Section I. [2] *Loc. cit.*, Section III, 5.

What is in any case out of the question is a psychologism of any sort or an essentially positivist sociology. But this clearly brings us back to what was said earlier about values, and I think that we come again upon a notion on which I have insisted a good deal in my recent writings: that to account for essence we should draw on a philosophy of light or of the light-giving (*des Erhellendes*). Essence or value—in this perspective the two tend to coincide—appear as a modality (*Weise*) of the light-giving principle rather than as an immaterial content which is illuminated. I am not unaware of the abstruseness of this statement, nevertheless I think that it usefully reflects on the notion of spiritual heritage. For at the end of these converging analyses it is to be seen more clearly than ever that the opposition of subject and object is not only barren but distorting. To understand this we need only recall that it is only by an abstraction that the gift can be separated from the way in which it is accepted, acknowledged and made into an object of gratitude.

In concluding, I should like to insist once more on the fact that a rigid and self-enclosed traditionalism involves a double failing: a failing against truth and a failing against charity. Here if anywhere, we should keep in mind the distinction between the open and the closed made by Bergson in his last writings. Let us simply say that the notion of a spiritual heritage depends on an open way of thinking, and that thought can only remain open if it is spurred on, as it were, by concern for the disinherited and above all by the refusal to conceive of their state of indigence as permanently unavoidable, when not only for the Christian but for any religious consciousness whatsoever, it can only represent the ceaseless appeal of the spirit to every man's good will.

THE BREAKING UP OF THE NOTION OF WISDOM

IT was in 1951, in South America where I had to speak on the role of the philosopher in the modern world, that I found I was questioning myself about the notion of wisdom—not so much about its contents as about its chances of manifestation in this world of today. Anticipating my conclusions, let me say at once that I believe these chances to be waning, or more exactly, that wisdom, taken in that sense of mediation which belonged to it throughout past ages, seems to be under such pressure that it is in danger, literally, of breaking up, of being dislocated. There has grown up on the one hand a whole system of technical knowledge aimed at the ordering of the world and of human life as a set of purely natural processes; while on the other, we see the growth of ascetic disciplines strongly influenced by Eastern thought—the oddest aspect of this is that it takes place at a moment when that way of thinking tends to desert the countries of its origin. It is true that here the terms are not properly fixed and that there is a readiness to talk glibly of the sages of India. To avoid confusion let us note to begin with that there is a fundamental difference between wisdom of the profane kind, such as the thought of Confucius or Epicurus, of Montaigne or of Goethe, and those disciplines by which the soul trains itself to overcome the world and its illusions. This, however, is no more than a preliminary distinction and though I think we should establish it in principle it will certainly not make it possible for us to attach a neat label to every case; we shall have to beware of this particularly when we talk of Christian wisdom. What I should like to try to show is that wisdom, in the traditional and profane sense of the word, used to occupy a sort of central zone, a sort of *middle* (*milieu*), whence it seems now called upon to withdraw—and in so doing it cannot but change its nature—while this central zone itself becomes nothing but an empty space, a space literally untenanted. It is this emptying that I should like to study.

As always, we must be careful not to be misled by metaphors. The spatial image *middle* can be usefully replaced by *measure*, and instead of saying that the middle space is disused we can say that measure is depreciated, it is no longer regarded as a value. I think that we should not be mistaken in saying that the *ne quid nimis* has been a constant of universal wisdom, and I will add that, reciprocally, the moment an excess—even an excess in the order of purity—is regarded as a good, we are outside wisdom properly so called (it being understood that we are still speaking of profane wisdom). I admit that this is not really a definition, but in the interests of clarity I will keep to it in what follows.

Let us ask ourselves in the first place what are the conditions and the ways by which the mind may be led to give to *measure* as such a value which is properly spiritual. But perhaps we should start by qualifying. Moderation, which is after all to some extent the same as measure, may be counselled in the interests of bodily health. In that case it is the dietician who speaks, he allows the use of alcohol or tobacco in moderation, etc. . . . He will say perhaps that the moderate use of tobacco or alcohol cannot do much harm, and that complete abstention might even be bad for a patient who is in the habit of smoking or drinking. But note this: the dietician speaks in the name of a kind of *wisdom of the body*. He may of course forbid the use of stimulants altogether, because of some special predisposition or a particular danger threatening his client. All the same, this idea of a wisdom of the body should make us think: how is it conceivable? Perhaps only to the extent that the body is likened to a mind in infancy, a mind which is still in need of tutelage? Dietetics would then be a sort of education of the body, combining firmness and flexibility. Let us go on to medicine. Clearly at this level the basic notion is that of an equilibrium to be discovered and maintained, an equilibrium which is living and cannot therefore be set up once and for all but has to be restored from moment to moment in relation to conditions which are constantly changing. For this continual changing of conditions is not accidental but, on the contrary, inherent in the very structure of life. It is surely only by a

faulty abstraction that we have grown accustomed to thinking of life as something on its own, apart from the conditions to which it must adapt itself. This is very important to our discussion. Even on the level of the body and of organic life these elementary truths can be lost to sight, and this undoubtedly happens whenever the organism is thought of as a machine, or rather, whenever the self-regulating power which belongs to the individual organism comes to be ignored. This mistake is carefully avoided by those doctors who, without falling into the wrong sort of quietism, believe that nature should be left to do its work, or rather that the use of medicines is to assist it: contrast this with the pride of the scientist who ignores the need for this kind of fundamental humility in the presence of the silent work of life.

We can go on from here to the field of ethics the more easily because wisdom can be seen from this point of view as a sort of moral dietetics. Even where the issue is physical health the advice of the dietician can be neglected or refused: 'You want me to give up my pleasures? Why should I? I do not care to prolong my life if I am to be deprived of everything that makes it livable.' In a world which respects wisdom, the answer is that there exists a hierarchy of ways of living, and that a man who has to give up his coffee or his whisky should be able to discover 'higher satisfactions' which should give a truer meaning to his life. It can also be said that on the social plane the individual has a duty to bring his conduct into harmony with the requirements of the natural group such as the family. This would be the moment to show how it is that these arguments for all their reasonableness and perennial validity tend in given circumstances to lose their 'existential weight', but we must first bring out in a more concrete way the implications of the notion of wisdom, and see in what circumstances it can predominate.

Let us note firstly that here the relation of dietician to client becomes interiorised: wisdom cannot be anything but an auto-dietetic, though this must be clearly distinguished from the Kantian autonomy which belongs to quite a different spiritual dimension. The sage is a man who has achieved a

certain mastery over himself. But I must emphasise two points. I have said he has *achieved* it: it seems to me that there can be no wisdom which is not the fruit of a slowly developed maturity, and maturity presupposes patience and continuity. Note that patience and continuity are even more than closely linked: patience *is* continuity, it is, as it were, its visage. And I would say that at the root of wisdom there is a degree of patience towards oneself, which is the contrary of presumption. He who would obtain everything from himself and this immediately will never attain to wisdom. He may indeed attain sanctity, but for this he stands in need of grace, and nothing in the least like grace is allowed by wisdom, in so far as it is self-aware. Should we then say that it is the result of training? Such a view would be not only superficial but contradictory, since a training of this sort, or if you like such a moral horticulture, already presupposes wisdom. If this is true we shall have to say that the passing of time is as necessary to wisdom as if it were organically part of it. Indeed, wisdom precludes the kind of instantaneity which used to be so fashionable among our contemporaries. Note that in the ages when it was respected wisdom was regarded as the prerogative of old age: and if respect for age has almost vanished in our day, this is undoubtedly connected with the devaluation suffered by wisdom itself.

Let us observe in passing that wisdom, considered not from the outside but from the point of view of someone who is seeking it, can never be looked upon as acquired. If a man were to say of himself, 'I am a sage', he would at once make himself ridiculous. Is this because the sage is expected to be falsely, hypocritically, modest? I do not think so, I think it is because we know that if wisdom became complacent, it would immediately get stiff in the joints and in the end fall into decay. It does seem in the last analysis that, for the seeker, wisdom is in a sense indistinguishable from the pursuit of it. We shall have to see why it is that this pursuit is today generally held suspect; our further analysis will throw light on this.

Let us consider firstly that, if not by right, at least in practice, in real life, the patience needed to attain wisdom goes perhaps not with leisure but certainly with a state that can be negatively

described as not-being-careworn. In an age more favourable to this pursuit than ours, not even the humblest artisan knew anything of the kind of care that obsesses the proletarian of today. Yet care, more than almost anything, makes for mental discontinuity. It is true that syndicalism, in so far as it assures the worker of security, tends to lift from him the burden of care and thereby helps him to be once more capable of wisdom. But it must be added at once that this is only true in so far as it confines itself to the professional sphere, for if it does not, it suffers in a most harmful way from the repercussions of the world's political unrest, and there, and for every reason in the world, there is no longer anything in the least like wisdom.

It could also be said that wisdom implies a certain distance from events, though we would need to examine the nature of that distance, as also of patience which has a hidden connection with it. The intrusion of politics into professional life seems to eliminate that distance, and this in a really degrading way since it is directed by the press, by propaganda and what have you. . . . It is really a kind of manipulation of human beings in view of party aims. Yet it must also be remembered—and this is most important—that if a worker stays outside his professional organisations because he believes them to be tainted by politics and wishes to keep his independence, he risks falling back into the worst kind of insecurity, into the most anxious care, and of thus also being left in his own way at the despotic mercy of events.

Almost the same thing could be said about the family in the modern world. It can hardly be denied that the family has been the nursery of a certain kind of secular wisdom, and that this wisdom is today falling to pieces. This is true both where the authority of the father is disappearing and where it is enforced against the current in a world which is less and less inclined to grant it. And this brings us inevitably to the problem of the relations between wisdom and tradition.

I have spoken of distance: is it not better to say detachment? But here again we come up against difficulties. The detachment of the sage, as against that of the saint which is quite different, is always in danger of being tainted by pretentiousness and by

a slant towards contempt. It is very possible for the sage who practices detachment—a sort of Lucretian detachment for instance, the kind of the *suave mari magno*—to fall into betrayal, and this on the plane of wisdom itself. For after all the true function of the sage is surely the function of linking together, of bringing into harmony. I am not thinking only or even chiefly of the Greeks, but of classical China, of the China of Lao Tse, and what here strikes me in a really marvellous light is that the sage is truly linked with the universe. The texts are unmistakable and revealing: the order to be established in life —whether of the individual or of the city or of the empire—is in no way separable from the cosmic order. And perhaps in this connection we should give much greater importance than is commonly done to those forms of knowledge, such as geomancy, astrology and so on, which were so highly developed in China and in other Asiatic countries and which today are discredited to the point of the absurd. The important thing—and I think it is hardly possible to insist on it too much—is that in this outlook the true aim of knowledge and of life is to be integrated in the universal order, and not at all to transform the world by bringing it into subjection to the human will, to man's needs or his desires. The expression 'practical anthropomorphism' which I have used elsewhere is, I think, exactly fitting in this connection. This attitude, which is that of humanity today, is the exact opposite of the one that might be called cosmo-centrism and which implied a deep humility on the part of man. It is an extraordinary illusion to believe that because we have done away with geo-centrism or even helio-centrism in the field of astronomy or cosmography we have also finished with anthropocentrism. What has happened is merely that it has been carried over to a different field—that of action, and it is, almost certainly, precisely in this field that it can lead to the most tragic consequences.

All this is not really a digression, quite the contrary. I think that wisdom in its greatest and most traditional sense has probably always consisted above all else in the will to exorcise that attitude of mind which is triumphantly manifested in what I have called practical anthropomorphism.

But to make it clearer we must examine the subtle relationship which exists between wisdom and reason.

There is no doubt that we think of the sage as a reasonable man. But is the word 'reasonable' altogether unambiguous? I do not think so. The reasonable man is perhaps fundamentally and above all else a man who perceives the limitations of reason. Let me recall what Chesterton wrote in *Orthodoxy*: a man who is insane is a man whose reason is without roots and functioning in a void. He adds that it is mystery that keeps the mind of man healthy: so long as you have mystery you have sanity, take away mystery and you fall into morbidity. Leaving aside this statement (though it seems to me profoundly true) what I think is evident is that reason in a reasonable man acts, as it were, as its own brake, and where this brake is lacking there can be no room for wisdom.

Doubtless it could be objected that we must not be misled by the use of the word wisdom in the singular and that there are very different types and modes of wisdom. There is the wisdom which some might call earthy and which is closely linked with common sense, the wisdom of Molière for instance; and at the opposite end of the scale there is a wisdom, such as that of the cynics, which on the contrary seems to despise common sense and to set it at naught. Between them is there a common denominator? I would prefer to put the question in dynamic terms. What is common is the direction, the magnet, and perhaps I should say that this is always grounded in the will to freedom. It could be said in a general way that wisdom is the appanage of the free, and also that what the sage is always looking for is authentic freedom.

It is easier to define this freedom negatively than to bring out its positive attributes. The sage is in the first place one who has silenced his passions, or at least tamed, domesticated them; he is also independent of public opinion and prejudice and is able in all circumstances to resist the collective impulse. Perhaps we should also say that this independence gives him peace and, if the word still has meaning, happiness, so long as this is not confused with pleasure. Even the hedonists have had to establish a hierarchy of pleasure and thus in a sense to go

beyond it. But it is difficult to conceive the sage without a kind of harmonious equilibrium which he cannot but feel as happiness. The famous pages of Montaigne are in this connection of a significance and value which transcend their author:

> The soul in which philosophy dwells must, by its own health, give health to the body also. Its contentment, repose and ease must shine forth, and it must so mould the outward body to its own form that it endows it with a gracious pride, an active and alert bearing and a quick and merry countenance. The chief sign of wisdom is a constant rejoicing (*esjouissance*). Its state is like that of things above the moon: always serene.

What is certain is that the notion of wisdom implies what might be called aristocratic values, this word being taken in an altogether general sense and in no way related to the idea of aristocracy as a class. What I mean is that there can be no wisdom without a recognition of a certain hierarchy of modes of living, without the prevalence of an idea of a better life, even if this is not referred to a religious or metaphysical absolute. But we must be careful not to jump to conclusions. There undoubtedly still exist democracies of a type which, at least provisionally, is compatible with the idea of the primacy of quality. This was certainly true of English democracy, at any rate until the First World War, though it is also true that it hung on the existence of an aristocracy regarded as exemplary. The notion, hard to analyse, of the gentleman as the exemplary type is of great significance. It could also be said (though much less clearly) of democracy in France, so long as it stood out, in whatever muddled and incoherent way, against the drag of egalitarianism. The problem is still more complicated and confused in the federal democracies of Switzerland and the United States. But wherever egalitarianism prevails, rooted as it always is in envy and resentment, the sense of quality tends to vanish. It is indeed depressing but quite logical and understandable that we should witness almost everywhere a progressive devaluation of the activities of the mind in favour of manual work. Even craftsmanship, in so many ways linked with an activity which is properly artistic, is systematically discouraged. It seems to me very hard indeed to formulate a

positive principle which could be claimed to justify this devaluation; probably it has several and fairly varied roots. We will examine one of them further on. It is easy enough to agree that in the 19th century abuses of exactly the opposite sort were the rule, and that the conditions of the proletariat in the first decades of the Industrial Revolution were such that they remained a lasting shame to the society which was responsible for them. But it is no less certain that the reversal, inevitable though perhaps it was, which has been taking place ever since, must result in the suppression, not only in practice but as of right, of anything having the remotest likeness to an aristocracy. For it is obvious that the One Party of a totalitarian régime has not the slightest bearing on it, it is not even a caricature of an aristocracy, it is its complete negation.

Yet it may perhaps be asked, can we be sure that a kind of wisdom cannot subsist even when the sense of quality has almost vanished? This needs careful consideration: there is no doubt that there existed in the past and particularly in such countries as France and Italy a popular wisdom. But was this not bound up with a tradition of craft and family life and even more deeply with a continuity which itself is on the way to vanishing if it has not vanished already? Here the role of environment is of great importance: even where there was nothing like the poetic and cosmic feeling prevalent in China for so many centuries, the individual was at least conscious of belonging to a deeply humanised environment. No one better than Péguy has shown the way in which intelligence and work were inter-related among the people; but his 'people' were essentially a people of craftsmen. Today this relationship is broken up and the world is in discord. What is very curious, incidentally, is that, for certain psycho-analytical reasons, the intellectual toadies to the people in exactly the measure in which his own thinking has become disembodied and floats about in a sort of indeterminate medium; I mention psycho-analysis because the intellectual suffers from an inferiority complex which is itself inseparable from a great pretentiousness: we are here in the field of ambivalence. But the people, flattered, indoctrinated, subjected to all kinds of propaganda, is doomed to lose the good sense

which was its appanage. The role of bad films cannot here be overlooked. Those who, by reason of their very poverty and of what was deeply real in their work and in their tastes, were genuinely and constantly in touch with what might be called the soil of existence, are today perverted by something that is certainly not culture but is rather its most harmful counterfeit.

That popular wisdom to which philosophers worthy of the name have always paid tribute cannot really be separated from common sense; and the disappearance of common sense is a phenomenon of immeasurable gravity and one which must inevitably bring about a radical change in the climate of the mind. It is comparable to some great meteorological transformation such as now and then takes place, and mental meteorology is the name I would propose for this change which is too deep and too general to be readily discerned; so widespread is it indeed that no doubt it happens in every one of us—that is why it needs a sustained effort of concentration to become aware of it.

With the disappearance of common sense it is likely that wisdom also is doomed to vanish, or at best to become the prerogative of the very few. Perhaps we might ask ourselves if at that point it does not change its nature in such a way as to become something approaching sanctity. We will come back to this important point. What I should like to stress now is that at bottom common sense is not so very different from wisdom. It is a kind of deposit left by wisdom: instead of drifting about it settles in the average human being, but only for so long as certain sociological conditions are maintained. The nature of these conditions is shown by the word 'common' itself. There is and there can be no common sense where there is no common life or common notions, that is to say where there no longer exist any organic groups such as the family, the village, and so on. Yet the collectivisation we are witnessing in every field is happening at the cost or even in contempt of these organic groups. This may seem astonishing at first sight, but it is very obvious if we think about it. For we are confronted everywhere with enormous agglomerations which are increasingly mechanised, so that the individuals are linked in much

the same way as the parts of a machine. This seems to me one of the most terrible effects of the predominance of the State. It could be said that the moment common sense goes out of institutions and civic relationships it is also driven from the human mind. There are countless examples of this: I am thinking especially of the burdening of teaching and school life by examination programmes which are often drawn up in defiance of common sense, so that the means of selection are made increasingly artificial and take less and less account of those human qualities which ought surely to be considered before all others. Another and very different instance is the fact that small enterprises, that is to say those which are on a really human scale, are systematically penalised in favour of enormous and dehumanised concerns.[1] Still another is the danger to such professions as medicine when they are run by functionaries.

I wish only to draw attention to the inevitable effect of all this upon mental attitudes. I admit that it is difficult to judge with certainty of a process which is still developing. But in observing those around us it is hard not to conclude that, as I have tried to show elsewhere, the spirit of abstraction is gradually taking hold of human beings and alienating them increasingly from the sense of life and living realities, while at the same time it makes of them a field which is dangerously favourable to the growth of totalitarian ideologies.

It is clear as daylight that these ideologies are incompatible with our idea of wisdom, if only because they shut out all notion of measure and relativity, and without this notion they inevitably drift into fanaticism: from the standpoint of wisdom—of any wisdom—fanaticism is literally madness. We have not yet spoken of tolerance and this is the moment to touch on it, for it is in this connection that the kind of regression that has been going on for half a century is perhaps most clear. It seems that it is not enough to say that tolerance is not practised: most people nowadays have not an idea of what it means.

Here it is necessary to point out the dangerous equivocations contained in the fashionable expression: *committed thought* (*pensée engagée*). The confusion which is at the back of it has really

[1] This is perhaps changing, as for instance in Germany.

disastrous results and can hardly be condemned too strongly.

The champions of committed thought start from the notion, which is true, that man is a being who exists in a particular situation and whose thinking can only start from the concrete situation in which he is. They are indeed right to condemn the sort of mental absenteeism which is almost certainly an intellectual sin. But what they are in danger of overlooking is that man defines himself precisely in terms of the *tension* between his own situation, which is always singular, and the universal values which are proposed to him: values which he does not have to create but to assert, and this not only in the abstract but by embodying them in his own conduct and work. We can indeed say with complete assurance that if the notion of commitment has any meaning it must be in relation to an absolute which has first to be recognised. As soon as what is stressed is not an absolute to be recognised but a creative act—an act claimed to be creative—by which human freedom *gives birth* to its own values, anarchy takes the place of reason. And as anarchy is untenable, a roundabout road—and something very like a crooked way out—will be looked for. This is where the notion of history is brought in, and of a historical sense to be used as a criterion and to replace the traditional values which are to be discredited once and for all.

But here again is an innovation which is not compatible with what has always been understood as wisdom. If indeed wisdom implies maturity it inevitably presupposes an attitude of respect for the past. By this I do not mean a blind conservatism or a superstitious feeling for tradition. To respect the past does not in any way prevent us from recognising—and in a most painful way—the mistakes of which our predecessors were guilty and of which we may perhaps in some manner have shared the guilt. But I think this recognition, and it should be as lucid as possible, should not preclude what I would like to call an intellectual piety, for, without this, all feeling for nuances, and as a result for equity, is completely lost. Yet today, still, no doubt, under the influence of committed thought, whole periods of history and 'classes' of men, seen in the distorting mirror of abstraction, are judged in the most

summary, overall and iniquitous way; while the very same people who are so censorious about the past, show themselves (in the same spirit of abstraction) remarkably indulgent to the abuses growing and multiplying in our own time, which they regard as the womb of history. It is not enough to say that this way of thinking is unreasonable, it should be stressed that it is clean contrary to all wisdom. For if on the one side we have, after all, the immense patrimony of history—busy as we seem to be dismantling it—we are only dealing on the other with unformed and indeterminate possibilities.

From these considerations, which could be developed further and in other ways, there seems to me to emerge this important fact: we are witnessing an enormous dislocation of something that can now be hardly seen or heard, but which has been wisdom. Of that wisdom there is nothing left but 'scattered limbs'. What I mean is this: obviously, the technical processes which have been so prodigiously developed and specialised during the past half century have as their aim the rational ordering of all the resources at the disposal of mankind; a whole body of recipes is growing up as to the detailed manner of this ordering. Yet if we ask ourselves what is the connection between this body—so vast that it has in it the material of countless manuals—and what used to be known as wisdom, we will see that it is only its residue, its left-over, its dregs. You could put it like this: the huge multiplication of means put at man's disposal, and of recipes for their use, takes place at the cost of the ends they are supposed to serve, or, if you like, at the cost of the values which man is called upon both to serve and to safeguard. It is as if man, overburdened by the weight of technics, knows less and less where he stands in regard to what matters to him and what doesn't, to what is precious and what is worthless.

But now let us turn to the corollary, the development, in the face of all this technical progress, of ascetic doctrines which are usually more or less directly influenced by the initiation practices of the East—we need only think of Aldous Huxley's recent evolution to get an idea of what this is. I am willing to admit the fitness of calling this asceticism wisdom but I believe

that in doing so there is a danger of overlooking an important difference of perspective. What it amounts to is that these conceptions can only really come to life within a mystique. I am leaving aside the question as to whether such a mystique is necessarily tied to a dogmatically defined religion, or whether it can take root beyond dogmatism as, for one, Huxley seems to believe. This is indeed a most important question but it falls outside our present field. It is not that I would deprecate mysticism; I would go further: it is not impossible that in the past the highest forms of wisdom known to man have been largely dependent on a mystique; all the same, on the level of experience, everything took place as though wisdom had its independent existence. There was a *sensorium commune* (the Latin words are stronger and more characteristic than the French or English) and this *sensorium commune* provided a sort of meeting ground for the sacred and the profane. What is new is that it is this very meeting ground that has collapsed, leaving the world more broken than it has ever been, perhaps, in any known epoch.

This shows itself in every field, even in that of philosophy proper. Anyone who has attended international philosophical congresses is aware that, even putting aside Marxism and its derivatives, there exist in the modern world two distinct types of philosophy without any living communication between them: there is on the one hand logico-mathematical neo-positivism which predominates in the Anglo-Saxon countries and in parts of Scandinavia, and, on the other, there are the doctrines of metaphysical inspiration, whether existentialist or not, current in Germany, France, Italy, Spain and in the countries of South America.

But we must go still further. I had occasion the other day to say publicly that atonal music often seems formless and without content—emotional or other—to those who belong to a different musical school: afterwards a mathematician who was in the audience came up to me and said: 'Incommunicability is not confined to the arts, we find it nowadays even in the most abstract sciences. Often a highly specialised scientist communicates with hardly anyone outside his own particular field of

research and his work becomes a closed book to scientists engaged in other fields.'

Of course, we may hope that a scholar of genius will arise tomorrow who will overthrow these partitions and establish an exchange between these water-tight worlds. But in the meantime the growing number of hermetic languages (hermetic in the non-esoteric sense) is creating a real Babel. This has its counterpart in the fact that the universal is now on the side of applied technics—of technical processes directed to this or that practical end. But we may well ask ourselves if this displacement of the universal from the theoretical sphere to the practical is not an event of the utmost gravity and one that heralds the dusk of civilisation.

The connection between this phenomenon and the one I tried to analyse earlier is obvious. There can be no wisdom without at least the veiled presence of the universal. To the extent that the universal is debased or driven out, wisdom becomes eclipsed and its place is taken by a system of technical processes tightly fitted into one another, whose complexity is only rivalled by the poverty of the ends it serves.

There remains a problem which is perhaps the gravest of all.

No question is more complex or needs greater care in handling than the relations between Christianity proper and that wisdom in the traditional sense I have been dealing with until now. Everything depends in the upshot on the way the accents are placed on different aspects of the Christian message, and also of course on the interpretation given to wisdom, for as we have seen it can be understood in very different ways. Let me explain. If you consider a sentence such as this, 'He who seeks his life shall lose it', or this, 'Unless you become as little children you shall not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven', it would seem that they are expressly directed against the notion of wisdom we have been obliged to adopt. This is perhaps even more evident in the second than in the first example. To become as little children: does this not imply giving up all the accumulated experience, all that maturity without which it seems impossible to attain to wisdom such as we conceive of it? Does it not at least force us to admit that there are two quite different

kinds of wisdom: the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of Christ? And we feel at once that between these opposites it will not be easy to find a common denominator. I will come back to this in a moment. Take the first of the two precepts: 'He who seeks to save his life shall lose it.' Here again there is a duality, an antagonism. What do the words mean exactly? To 'seek to save one's life', this is surely not only, not even chiefly, to look for means of prolonging one's existence. To save one's life must mean to establish it on what, from the natural point of view, is a solid basis, and this involves the use of foresight. But what the Gospel shows us is that in acting in this fashion we start from a faulty evaluation of what is essential and what is not, we labour to preserve what is in reality the less important and in so doing, without knowing it, we compromise what is in reality the most precious.

Such examples chosen among countless others show us without the least doubt that what the Gospel brought with it is what Nietzsche was later to call a transvaluation. This transvaluation is indeed so radical that what on one level is seen as wisdom on the other level is seen as foolishness.

As time went on, however, the evolution of moral philosophy in Christendom tended to gloss over this paradox and to attenuate its scandalousness; though it is also true that time and again there arose great religious souls who reopened the breach which others had sought to close and denounced the misdirection given, consciously or unconsciously, by the teachers of the preceding epoch.

To be more explicit: in order to make it clear to us that, after all, Christianity asks of us nothing that is against reason, the accent has been generally placed on the implications of the notion of salvation; salvation being represented as the fulfilment of our heart's needs, it was relatively simple to show that to follow the precepts of the Gospel—however disconcerting they might seem at first sight—was to act with the greatest wisdom: for is not wisdom, before all else, the considered appropriation of means to an end regarded as an undisputed good? Conversely, it could be proved that it is senseless to conform to a set of rules directed to a secondary good such as happiness in this

world. Indeed, is it not perhaps a mistake or a betrayal even to call this happiness a secondary good? Should not its pursuit be judged incompatible with the teaching of Christ, whose doctrine is a life and a way—a way that leads through the Crucifixion?

Obviously, all this needs infinite shading and qualifying. We could say for instance:

(1) the more the corruption of nature resulting from sin is stressed, the more shall we be inclined to suspect and in the end even to condemn an ethic, that is to say a wisdom, which defines itself in reference to the natural order.

(2) the more the eschatological character of the basic Christian affirmation is brought into the foreground, the more shall we be led to stress the urgency of sanctifying action, as against that philosophy of slow fruition without which, I repeat, it seems difficult to speak of wisdom.

But really to understand the contemporary situation, really to discern the fissure which exists in this domain as in others, I think that the following observation is necessary:

I have said that the two kinds of wisdom seemed reconcilable in terms of salvation and of its primacy. But what salvation? Are we not dealing here with a current notion of salvation which is at bottom narrowly individualistic and in danger, through its very hardening, of overlooking certain fundamental aspects of the Christian message? There is no doubt at all that we must protest strongly against the sort of spiritual utilitarianism which claims to teach the safest way for each of us to attain beatitude. How relevant in this connection is Franz Werfel's admirable novel, *Heaven Lost and Regained*, where a servant, anxious to prepare as well as possible for what she really imagines as a kind of celestial spa, undertakes to pay for the keep and education of her young nephew destined to become a priest, to offer Masses for her intention, and generally to act as the best possible intercessor before the One who is the overseer of the ordering of eternal life.

It hardly needs saying that this notion of intercession is undilutedly profane. The priest is seen as somebody who has enough influence, who can pull the right strings to obtain for us

the advantages we could not get for ourselves if we were left to our own resources.

From the spiritual point of view, all this is thoroughly scandalous, the fundamental error being to imagine salvation as a share in a sort of celestial allotment scheme: for whatever our idea of Heaven, this allotment scheme notion has to be thrown out once and for all.

All this is indeed strongly felt by Christian consciences nowadays and the more alive of them have undoubtedly abjured this traditional mistake. The danger is that they might fall into a different mistake which is perhaps even more grave. What tends to take the place of this individualistic utilitarianism is a historicism contaminated by such doctrines as Marxism which have nothing whatever to do with Christianity, a historicism which tries, though vainly, to obtain the blessing of the Church.

From my own standpoint in the present study it follows that this contamination by history is a mortal danger to Christian wisdom. We have already had a glimpse of the reason for this: a conception which takes as its terms of reference an imaginary future, a future imagined in the abstract, is contrary to the very notion of wisdom. I will give only one example of what I mean but I think it illustrates it vividly. I have heard with my own ears a well-known cleric laying down in principle that the régimes in the Sovietised countries are in line with history and almost canonising history itself. And when his attention was drawn to the millions languishing in prison and in labour camps he exclaimed: 'What is this in comparison with all the rest?' Actually there are two distinct types of error in this aberration: to the error of the historicist proper is added the error of the scientist, used to juggling with figures and who takes advantage of the very hugeness of the numbers to cease imagining anything whatsoever. It is interesting to note that in this case the sin against common sense is also the sin against justice and charity.

Will it be said that this is an isolated instance? I do not believe it. This evil is like a vertigo; for reasons which are extremely complex and into which I cannot go in detail, we see

countless Christians whose heads are literally turned by history, people who are desperately anxious to conform to history—though history by its very essence is what is impenetrable to us.

Thus it is only fair to admit that even among Christians that breaking up or dislocation of wisdom which I have tried to analyse is increasingly taking place. For there is clearly a danger that as a reaction to this kind of historicist frenzy there may arise a frenzy of integralism, a return to the most rigid and antiquated thinking in theology. Nothing could be further from wisdom worthy of the name. It is true that there always remains to very pure and lofty souls the resource of disregarding all this, of escaping upwards as it were into the hope of attaining to mystical union. This indeed is the supreme gift, the supreme realisation; but in relation to wisdom it is a beyond. Besides, even here it is difficult not to feel a certain apprehension, for should not holiness and mysticism (which are not the same but have between them a most complex relationship) have a sort of human foundation of natural wisdom and morality? And where this foundation is threatening to collapse, is there not a danger of an element of error or at least of illusion finding its way into this most pure and lofty work?

Enough has been said to show the infinitely tragic spiritual situation of the modern world. What is particularly grave, if we reflect on it, is that wisdom or common sense, untenanted and as it were set adrift, may be taken in tow by a singularly adroit propaganda which is quite capable, in a transitional period, of using them to its own advantage, since these dispositions lose their consistency the moment they are no longer related to a stable order, to a truth. And we have seen that order, stability and truth are mortally compromised as soon as it is the will to power that predominates and turns the world into a factory. From then on, by what is only seemingly a paradox, the practical and the metaphysical problems merge into one. I mean that it will not be enough to exhume this or that general principle once elucidated by a secular thinker or a doctor of the Church; such a principle will be valuable

towards reconstruction only if it becomes incarnate, and this kind of incarnation, as I have said, can only take place at the humblest and most intimate level of human life: the level at which a few men of good will meet to work at a common task. I have said a common task, for it is certainly not a question of inditing some ambitious and utopian programme. Experience has taught us that not only are such programmes doomed to failure, but what is more serious, their failure, by a sort of inevitable repercussion, worsens the situation they started from. I realise that a call to humility is disappointing at a time when the label 'world-wide' is fashionable whenever an organisation is set on foot. But this fashion is just the mark of one of our most harmful illusions. I cannot protest too strongly against the notion that our thinking nowadays is only valid if it is on a world-wide or planetary scale. Here as everywhere, it is the sense of the neighbour that needs awaking, for it is the only safeguard against calamities which indeed are certain to be world-wide.